



Janet and John Fisher

Sandra Phinney photos

Celebrating 25 years

AND STILL GOING
STRONG

by Sandra Phinney

I once read that “customer service is an attitude, not a department.” I’ve been thinking about this lately and applying it as a measuring stick in my travels. The Fishers’ Loft Inn, in Port Rexton, N.L., comes to mind. Intuitively, I know the success of this inn is due to the attitude of its owners, John and Peggy Fisher. Their vision, combined with a lot of hard work and a commitment to honoring local – local suppliers, local staff, local traditions – has added up to 25 years of success.

My husband Barrie MacGregor and I stayed there two decades ago, not long after the inn opened. I recall the warmth of the owners, the down-home goodness of the place, and how unique the property, food, and accommodations were. This summer, my sister Carmen Phinney and I stayed there, and I was pleasantly surprised to have that same feeling. We were pampered but not patronized, and, in spite of the inn being both cozy and classy, there’s not a whiff of pretention. It was also refreshing to have genuine interactions with the



staff rather than superficial or canned responses that are so common today.

Although I didn't spend time with the owners this last visit, I bought the book *Taking a Chance: The First 25 Years of Fishers' Loft Inn ... An Urban to Rural Journey* (with more than 80 inn recipes) written by the Fishers and Roger Pickavance. It's a delicious read with great photos, wonderful stories, and mouth-watering recipes. From the book, I gleaned the following whys and wherefores that prompted the creation of the Fishers' Loft Inn.

While living in Peterborough, Ont., with their two young sons, Luke and Gabe, the Fishers considered buying a summer place. As John had "discovered" Newfoundland on a road trip travelling across Canada promoting a book he had written, they set off in 1988 to explore the big island. The following spring, they bought a home in Port Rexton. Peggy says, "It didn't matter to us that the house had a damp and musty feel, or that the only furniture we had were a couple of mat-

tresses on the floor, a fridge, stove, and dresser. It was ours, the night sky was brilliant, the whole world was still."

Peggy recounts how the boys spent the summer, "basically being free." The family met and made friends with people in the community, fished, visited abandoned outposts, and became immersed in the lifestyle of rural Newfoundlanders. Returning to Peterborough at the end of summer so their sons could return to school was tough. So much so, that within two months, they decided to pack everything in and move to Newfoundland.

Despite being comfortable in Peterborough, one question kept surfacing. Was there more to life? "There was nothing rational about our pulling up stakes. Neither was it an act of courage or vision," John says. "It just felt like waking up. In hindsight, it was likely a mild form of desperation."

Although John had a well-established business as a consultant, networking and landing contracts while living in Port Rexton were more difficult once he was out of the mainstream.

His income took a nosedive. “The novelty of swapping urban existence for an isolated rural place, no matter how ideal the move, began to wear a bit thin,” John says. “Another way of paying the bills had to be found.”

Serendipity stepped in. It was 1997 and an owner of a nearby B&B asked if the Fishers would take their overspill. After considering the pros and cons, they turfed their sons out of their “boy cave” space in the loft above the garage, and five months later hung out their shingle. As luck would have it, the opening of the Fishers’ Loft Bed and Breakfast coincided with the 500th anniversary of John Cabot’s alleged landing in Bonavista. “Queen Elizabeth II attended the celebratory events with more dignitaries and crowds than ever before seen on the Bonavista Peninsula,” John says. “Our little bed and breakfast was off to a crackling start.”

Growth was steady. Two years after opening their B&B, they added two traditional homes including suites, a commercial kitchen, bar, library, and sitting room. They also increased their staff, opened the dining room for breakfast and a prix fixe evening meal. Between 2003 and 2005, the Fishers added a mansard-style house with three rooms, reception area, and book and craft shop, opened the Ridge House with three suites and three rooms, and built a large cedar and glass greenhouse. By 2011, seeing the need for a conference centre, they proceeded to build one. It includes conference space, a boardroom, and 12 guest rooms on the second floor.

As authenticity is important to the Fishers, a lot of time, thought, and money went into creating each building and furnishing them. John explains, “We built with wood, using traditional construction techniques long proven effective in sheltering families from the rugged North American climate. Clapboard, invaluable aesthetically, also strengthens and stabilizes these houses.” John adds how local craftsman, Mike Paterson, refined the design of traditional furniture and built the inn’s chairs, tables, beds, and armoires, as well as the fireplace surrounds, bar, doors, and windows.

I loved sitting on Paterson’s rocking chairs on the verandah of the Main House overlooking the bay. I have yet to find the words to describe the tranquility I experienced while sitting there, sipping my morning coffee. Surrealistic comes to mind. I had the same feeling walking around the “racing labyrinth,” designed by David Goff Eveleigh. Mind you, I was in no hurry to race. But just walking inside the well-worn mini gullies of grass and gazing up at Christina Nicks’ amazing metal moose always made me smile. Nicks created the moose while she

was doing an artist’s residency at the inn in 2014. John and Peggy provided the materials as well as a tent-like structure where the artist could weld and be protected from the rain.

The Fishers have a commitment to the arts that I’ve rarely seen in private business. More than 200 pieces of fine art adorn the walls inside the rooms, suites, and public buildings such as the sitting area next to the dining room, and conference centre. It’s much like having a series of mini galleries throughout the property. John points out that the



inn benefits from the aesthetics of the art on the wall, and the artists retain all of the proceeds from sales of their work. Newfoundland writers and publishers also partner with the inn through a reading series offered each season. And that's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the Fishers support of the arts.

Oddly enough, there's also a ripple effect. Perhaps just a

small ripple, but one that makes me feel good. On my first visit to Fishers' Loft Inn two decades ago, I was struck by some etchings created by artist Cecil Day. Bringing one home on the plane was out of the question; nor could I afford the shipping. Although Day is from Newfoundland, I later learned that she lives just a few kilometres outside my hometown of Yarmouth, N.S. Since then, I've been able to purchase some



St Paul's Anglican Church, Trinity N.L.



Rising Tide Theatre pageant



Donna Butt

of her etchings and I credit the Fishers for introducing me – albeit indirectly – to this wonderful artist.

By now you must be wondering about the food at the inn. As my sister Carmen frequently sends travelogues to family and friends, I've taken the liberty of swiping a paragraph from one of her road journals on this very topic.

“For the benefit of my foodie friends, dinner at the inn last evening included, in order, an *amuse-bouche* of a slice of rare rib roast with a dab of Dijon served between two homemade cheese crackers; followed by a salad of local leafy greens with tangerine slices, crunchy fried capers and anchovy dressing; followed by the creamiest polenta I have ever eaten topped with wild mushrooms, grated Parmesan, fresh oregano, and crispy bread crumbs; followed by the diner's choice of salmon or duck confit served with celery root remoulade and wilted mustard greens; followed by a chocolate brownie with vanilla cream, caramel sauce, and chopped peanuts. How I love good food ...”

You get the picture!

The last page of *Taking a Chance* sports a photo of a tiny turquoise door that the Fishers found in the woods one day. The cutline reads: “Where to next?” I recently had an email exchange with John and asked what they had in store for the next 25 years. He replied, “In truth, the day to day of managing the inn tends to eat into medium- and long-term planning. Planning lives in one's mind. We know that if you don't incrementally address these items every year, you risk becoming a victim of the future. So here's what we think about. Some of these items will be implemented in the coming two years; others further out in time.”

The list of items includes focusing on everything from the environment (such as aiming to use only self-generated renewable energy sources, and becoming the only inn in Canada to be completely off-grid), to infrastructure (upgrading all bathrooms and rooms), guest services (personalized day planning; second language capacity), the arts (six-month artist residencies; classical music presentations in collaboration



Above: Maudie's Tea Room Below: Oh My Cheeses

with Memorial University's School of Music), and events (lunch time presentations such as "The Innovators" and "Stars of the Newfoundland Diaspora").

This is but a slice of what's in store. When I mentioned how the list was both impressive and ambitious, John replied, "While the objectives may look like dreaming, they are absolutely 'must dos' if we are to keep pace with the ever-fluid trends and aspirations extant in the marketplace." John also brought to my attention the word *kaizen*, which shows up in a section of lessons learned in *Taking a Chance*. *Kaizen* is Japanese for "change for better" and means adopting a continuing process of questioning how things are working followed by improvement and change.

Customer service is an attitude, not a department. Indeed, it is.

MORE TO DO

While staying at the Fishers' Loft Inn, consider visiting the following – all are a short drive away.

Hikers will love the **Skerwink Trail**, the **Skerwink Trail Access to Dog Cove**, and the **Fox Island Trail**. The panoramic views are spectacular, and the berry pickin' is good too!

If you are into theatre and historical stuff, **Trinity** is the place to go. The **Rising Tide Theatre** stages a series of top-notch performances, as well as an outdoor pageant. You could end up in a magnificent church with a surprise choir. Chances

are you'll run into Donna Butt, the moving force behind the theatre's success. Some of the buildings in the village such as the **Green Family Forge** and the **Cooperage** have staff who are a font of both information and tales.

Taking Route 236, a dirt road outside of Port Rexton up to Knights Cove, will eventually take you to **Keels** – another charming village on the coast. This was the location for the film, *Maudie*. Selby Mesh, who owns the general store where some of the scenes were shot, also operates **Maudie's Tea Room** in the rear of the building. It's a seasonal café with a million-dollar view. Before you leave Keels, be sure to ask where you can find the Devil's Footprints. I'll say no more, save that surrounding Keels is an extraordinary amount of plump juniper berries. (And no, the two are not related.)

Port Rexton Brewing Co. is friendly, funky, and has everything from a wide selection of craft beers to homemade lemonade. Adjoining the brewery on the far side, you'll find **Oh My Cheeses**, featuring the best selection of grilled cheese sandwiches on the planet. Carmen had a "Reuben" – Montreal smoked meat with Dijon mustard and sauerkraut. I chose "Hot Mess" with caramelized onion, Swiss cheese and Mozzarella, bacon, and spicy mayo. It was so good I was tempted to have another one for dessert.

There's so much more to this region. Just go, snoop around, and chat with the locals. You will soon be adding to this list.

